

# Long Live the Bibliophile!\*

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TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO the rare book rooms in American college and university libraries could be counted on one's fingers. Now the institution that doesn't have one tends to feel it is out of step. Rare book rooms are not just at Harvard and Yale, they are literally everywhere. I am sure this would have puzzled my friend, the old lady from Boston. She heard a sermon preached by a stranger in the Arlington Street Church, and when she complimented the preacher afterwards, she took advantage of the occasion to probe into his origins. "I can't quite place your accent—she said—it doesn't quite seem to be the Newtons, or Dedham, or Milton. What can it be?" "Why, Madame, I'm an Iowan." "A WHAT?" "An Iowan, from the state of Iowa." "Oh," she said, hesitantly. Then she turned a benign smile on him and said, "Well, God is everywhere, isn't he?"

There are many reasons for the everywhere-ness of rare book rooms, but the two principal ones are the innate generosity of the American college alumnus, and the country's tax laws. Please never forget that the generosity preceded the tax laws, though unquestionably the tax laws have encouraged the generosity. Barring a prolonged depression or an atomic catastrophe, these two major forces will continue to operate, and rare book rooms will continue to grow in number and in size. What

special needs will be created by this trend—indeed, are being created already?

*First*, the need to train a group of professional bibliophiles, or book-loving professionals.

*Second*, the need to expand and integrate privately-formed collections of rare books into fields of special concentration of use to the faculty, and, through them, of stimulus to the students.

*Third*, the need to enter new areas of collecting.

*Fourth*, the need to inspire private collectors, and to give them constant encouragement and guidance.

These seem to me the principal needs, and I should like to explore with you briefly some proposals for dealing with them.

You will ask at once what I mean by professional bibliophile, or book-loving professional. I mean a person trained in the use of books and manuscripts who has an abiding faith in their importance and a veneration for them as physical objects. Richard DeBury described such a man six hundred years ago, when he said he should prefer slim pamphlets to fat palfreys. He must believe in the recorded word as the basic source of knowledge and understanding. He must appreciate the virtues inherent in the original, as compared with a photographic reproduction. But he must go beyond this, and know that truth, that elusive, that mercurial substance, is to be learned not from one witness, but from the testimony of many, and that even the least of any cloud of witnesses has something of value to contribute, and is worthy of the bibliophile's loving care.

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Television and radio are stiff competitors of the written word. It is true that Socrates and Christ achieved their power through the spoken, not the written word. But would their influence have continued through the ages without the writings of Plato and the four Evangelists?

Where shall we look for the book-loving professionals that we need to staff our rare book rooms? I think they will best be found in the graduate schools that give advanced training in the sciences and the humanities. Do not, please, misunderstand me when I say this. I am not trying to run down the library schools. Anybody who has worked in a European library will testify at once that the professional librarians of this country are a tremendous asset to scholarship. But I feel that the ideal rare book curator is more closely akin to the historian, the musicologist, or the English Ph.D., than he is to the technically trained librarian. And I believe that the curator can gain a sufficient knowledge of library techniques by brief indoctrination at a library school, followed by working visits to established rare book collections. There should be more such working visits, or temporary exchanges of personnel; one learns a great deal of painting or printing or surgery by working with various experienced practitioners. But this whole subject of the scholar as librarian is one on which Dr. Taylor and Dr. David could speak better than I, because they could speak from personal experience.

Let us turn now to a consideration of the rare book collection itself. Its nucleus is often the work of one man. I think at once of the Wrenn collection at the University of Texas, James Ford Bell's at Minnesota, the Phillips books bequeathed to Haverford, and the Luther Lewis library bought for Texas Christian by Amon Carter. These are inspiring gifts, that their new owners have every right to be

proud of. But in accepting these munificent gifts, the colleges and universities have undertaken an implied obligation to maintain and expand these collections in the decades to come, and to make them even more useful to scholars than they now are. If the collections remain static, they will become like Miss Havisham's moldering bridal banquet that so astonished Pip in *Great Expectations*.

An energetic acquisitions program is therefore a necessity. To continue to buy books only if they mention tobacco, glass, or cotton, to restrict the collection to books dealing with the Spanish Southwest or the art of navigation, would be rather stultifying in the eyes of a progressive faculty. New avenues of development must be explored, and here the wise curator will seek advice and assistance. The successful acquisitions program requires the equal participation and cooperation of three people: the librarian, the faculty member, and the antiquarian bookseller. It goes without saying that the group that is most actively concerned with using the material, the faculty, must be aroused to its opportunities and responsibilities. I know that there are rare book custodians who regard the faculty as a nuisance, just as there are librarians who regard readers as a necessary evil, but these curmudgeons are a dying race. The man I have called a professional bibliophile will welcome the help of the faculty, and will know also how to keep it in its place, since he himself was once a member of that goodly company.

The need for the participation of the booksellers must also be stressed. These are men who truly love books. Most of them could have made a far better living in some other occupation. They are generally thorough individualists with a wealth of experience acquired at their own expense. I have always found their advice and assistance well worth the profit they charge on



their wares. The curator and faculty member should develop contacts with a few alert booksellers, never just one, and make use of their knowledge and their sources.

I constantly hear the complaint that the book world is running out of material worth collecting. This is surely one of the most myopic of popular errors. It is true that certain areas are virtually exhausted. The collector of Caxtons or Shakespeare quartos has doubtless embarked on a frustrating and expensive pursuit. But there are plenty of other things to collect, and the main ingredients necessary in forming a collection that will be of scholarly value are imagination and perseverance. The institutional collector must exercise these just as much as the private collector, and this is why he must know what will be useful to his faculty and what he can reasonably expect to secure from the book-trade on his budget. He will do well to remember too that the word is recorded elsewhere than in books and manuscripts: one of the most valuable collections is that formed by Allan Nevins and his cohorts at Columbia, the autobiographies of famous men, recorded on tape.

Having said this much about the rare book collection itself, I want to ask you to consider whether you like that name—"rare book room." Isn't it a rather stand-offish term? Doesn't it sound awfully precious and exclusive? I fear it has developed what the semanticists would call a perjorative connotation. And it is no longer sufficiently inclusive. Can't we think of something better, like the term "special collections"?

"Special collections" implies a scope broad enough to include the Eastern cultures, a possible development of the future, although now it is undeniably true that the rare book rooms of our college and university libraries are 99% devoted to American and European history, science, and literature. As Norman Cousins pointed out in a recent editorial in the *Saturday Re-*

*view*, "except for a handful of colleges and universities, higher education in America has never gone beyond what are largely empty generalizations about the majority of the world's peoples. . . . We venerate what we call the hundred greatest books, but the titles that have the greatest meaning for more than one billion people are almost totally ignored." The Charles Ames collection of material concerning southeast Asia is still a private library in St. Paul, though I understand it will ultimately go to the University of Minnesota.

This brings me to my fourth and last major need—the need to inspire private collectors. Today's private collectors provide the materials for tomorrow's libraries. Yet collectors are always complaining about lack of encouragement in the pursuit of their hobbies. The rich libraries, one hears, are buying up everything worthwhile. The big collections are no longer being dispersed at auction, but are transferred *en bloc* to institutions, imprisoning their treasures forever. Collectors in smaller communities find no one to talk to—their friends from the country club or the office only ask that galling question, have you really read all these books? Now some of you may think that all collectors are harmless neurotics anyway, and that you can afford to disregard their complaints. Not so. Librarians must pursue a number of methods for encouraging and guiding collectors. Talk to them about their books, let them know of purchasing opportunities in their special fields, sell them duplicates, offer them libations in the interests of bibliophily, and keep their spirits up. Don't always run after them for money—they may think their book purchases are better than yours. And don't keep pressing them to make new wills leaving their libraries to you-know-what college. Whatever you do, don't let the amateur of books, the private collector, become extinct.